

# A Restart of What Language Arts Is:

## Bringing Multimodal Assignments Into Secondary Language Arts

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In the position statement of the International Reading Association's Commission on Adolescent Literacy, Moore, Bean, Birdyshaw, and Rycik (1999) described a wide and often unpredictable range of literacy practices that adolescents are increasingly called upon to perform. These practices demand a high level of literacy flexibility and an ability to adapt to contingent situations. Although adaptability and flexibility are encouraged in the majority of out-of-school literacy tasks, many of the literacy tasks students perform in school tend to reinforce a model of literacy as a closed body of knowledge that is predictable and constant (De Castell & Luke, 1988; Obidah, 1998; O'Brien, 1998; U.S. Department of Education, n.d.). In addition, there appears to be a belief that nonprint-based literacy activities are somehow less valuable or even irrelevant in the language arts classroom. (For critiques of this stance, see Buckingham & Sefton-Green, 1994; Lewis, 1998; Ohta & Tobin, 1995; Tobin, 2000.) This research sought to unsettle such a model. Using student experiences within a course that expands the concept of text into nonprint modes (e.g., film, photography, music, and Web pages), this study examined how language arts teachers might embed multimodality. This multimodality represented an awareness of

Multimodal assignments in language arts involve student learning through not only print and verbal language activities but also visual, kinesthetic, aural, and spatial activities. Language arts teachers can use these elements as a means of developing stronger critical thinking among their students. Traditionally, in language arts classrooms, print media has been at the top of the media hierarchy. Multimodality instead posits print texts as part of a wider range of communication options. Students who participate in multimodal activities fall into one of three groups: students who struggle to connect the multimodal course activities with what they see as real language arts and literacy work; students who connect quite actively and dramatically with multimodal course activities and see them as highly relevant to language arts; and students who are not certain how nonprint and print texts are connected but who start to accept such connections as important over time. These contradictions within student experiences highlight a need for educators to carefully consider both the conditions under which multimodal assignments are given and the underlying reasons for bringing multimodal thinking into the classroom. Multimodality can free students' thinking, but only if students understand that multimodal activities are part of an overall orientation towards thinking and communication. If students see them as a temporary change of pace before returning to print-based thinking, then such activities can easily be devalued or seen as a way to avoid traditional reading and writing as well as thinking. Larger curricular goals also need to be made clear for students so that they have an opportunity to move beyond a mindset of assignment completion and think about how multimodal thinking fits into broader communication purposes.

## Summary

student learning through not only print and verbal language activities but also visual, kinesthetic, aural, and spatial activities in the courses, and these were used as a means of developing critical thinking. This approach diverged from the traditional view of nonprint activities as a reward for students who have already mastered print-based literacy.

## Theoretical Framework/Literature Review

To contextualize the instructional orientation explored within this article, it is important first to understand some key issues in the development of the English language arts curriculum. The English language arts curriculum has been a contested territory since the inception of English as a discipline (see Applebee, 1974; Graff, 1987; Myers, 1996). Current shifts toward defining texts in increasingly multimodal ways continue the debate about what subject material is and is not appropriate in language arts classrooms.

### *Defining the Field: Traditional Literacy Models and Sociocultural Models*

Arnold's designation of certain texts as necessary reading for all students who wished to contribute meaningfully to society (Myers, 1996) initiated a strong emphasis on classical texts within secondary schools, justifying the creation of a literary canon. This emphasis lent support to the cultural heritage model advocated by Adler and Van Doren (1940), Bloom (1987), and Hirsch and Trefil (1987), where the English curriculum was intended to preserve a Western-oriented base of cultural understanding. Although an emphasis on preserving culture still carried weight ideologically, an even stronger tradition of educational efficiency, beginning with Cubberly's model of education imitating factory mass production techniques (Myers, 1996) and continuing through post-Sputnik concerns about American students' inability to master basic reading and writing skills (Clifford, 1989; De

Castell & Luke, 1988; Glass, 1979), focused on breaking English study into measurable parts (e.g., grammar, vocabulary, and plot synopsis) so that learning could be more accurately monitored. Efficiency and cultural heritage models have clashed repeatedly over time, with efficiency receiving current emphasis under the No Child Left Behind Act's (2001) focus on standardized testing of literacy skills (U.S. Department of Education, n.d.).

However, the focus on measurable parts and efficient transmission of a set body of content knowledge has been problematic because it limits how students learn to use literacy beyond school contexts. The shift to an increasingly global economy required workers who were able to adapt their literacy practices to unpredictable situations. Seeing literacy in terms of static content hinders students from developing this necessary adaptability. Gee (2000) noted that global economies rely heavily on critical thinking work: reading contexts, designing products to better fit individual customer needs and desires, and adapting quickly to new meaning-making situations. As Brandt (2001) observed, "Dominant economies make their interests visible in social structures and communication systems" (p. 42), and economic shifts have called attention to the need for people to make meaning in areas outside of linguistic modes. If schools have been charged with preparing students to function in the larger world, a world that relies on multiple meaning systems and adaptability, then a focus on transmitting a closed body of literacy knowledge shortchanges students of future opportunities.

The multimodal thrust of this article stemmed from socio-cultural literacy theorists such as Luke (1998), who argued that literacy education was "always a social and political matter" (p. 311). Sociocultural theorists have taken issue with a definition of literacy as a finite body of transmissible skills, arguing instead that literacy is tightly connected to the social context within which it is taught. Neilsen (1998) observed that whenever literate behaviors were learned, the social and political values of a particular system also were learned. Barton, Hamilton, and Ivanic (2000) noted that literacy was best understood as a social practice influenced by constantly shifting cultural, histori-

cal, and social influences. Street (1985) emphasized how literacy events (specific enactments of literacy in specific contexts) point toward literacy practices (broader belief systems about what literacy should allow people to be and do). Building from this concept, Gee (1999) saw literacy as inextricably bound in *Discourses*: context-specific, socially determined means of viewing the world and communicating within it (contrasted with “small d” *discourses*, which are individual manifestations of larger worldviews). From a sociocultural stance, literacy can only be defined in relation to the context in which it is practiced, taught, and learned.

### *A Multiliteracies Stance*

In 1998, a group of literacy sociocultural theorists gathered in New London, CT, to reexamine how literacy was conceptualized in light of new technological advances. Calling themselves the New London Group, they distilled their discussions into a theoretical concept called *multiliteracies*, a term designed to address the shift from a primarily language-based model for literacy to one that includes language as one meaning-making mode (New London Group, 2000). Students examined how literacy has been enacted within specific communities (situated practice), learned how to enact such literacy themselves (overt instruction), considered why such enactments have been designed (critical framing), and extended a specific literacy enactment to new contexts (transformed practice). Multiliteracies theorists borrowed the term *semiotics*—the study of sign systems for creation of meaning—from linguistic anthropology to emphasize that language was one sign system among many. Multiliteracies theory has been enacted in numerous ways, ranging from examination of cattle auctions and analysis of literacy-related training materials for home-based literacy instruction to physical positioning of student bodies within a classroom (Barton et al., 2000; Cope & Kalantzis, 2000; Kress, 2003; Lankshear & Knobel, 2003; Leander & Sheehy, 2004; Snyder, 2002). The use of multiliteracies theory within literacy classroom spaces can potentially address Morgan’s (1993) call to reconfigure language arts classes,

so that rather than privileging written texts, teachers help students consider why certain modes of meaning have been privileged and how such privileging might be avoided.

Multiliteracies is rooted in the semiotic theories of De Saussure and Peirce. For De Saussure (1966), the connection between a word, or *signifier*, and its meaning, or *signified*, was arbitrary. He compared language to a piece of paper, with one side as the mental concept (signified) and the other side as the linguistic form that expresses that mental concept (signifier). De Saussure argued that people cannot interpret the world around them without creating signifiers for all the signifieds they encounter. For example, an individual may encounter a large, four-legged animal that eats grass and moos (the signified). In wanting to describe that animal and distinguish it from another large, four-legged animal that eats grass and makes a different sound (like a neigh), the individual calls it a cow (the signifier). There was nothing inherent in the signifier *cow* that connects absolutely and naturally to the actual animal, but the signifier creates a way to communicate meaning to others who also wanted to refer to the animal. Language, a collection of signifiers, mediates meaning.

Peirce disagreed with De Saussure's portrayal of language as arbitrary and instead offered a three-part model to explain how a sign's meanings connect with physical and cultural factors rather than solely linguistic ones. As Siegel (1995) explained, "a sign does not simply stand for an object, it tells something about the *meaning* of that relationship, and this requires a third component" (p. 459). There is always some sort of interpretation involved in meaning-making via signs, which creates further signs that must be additionally interpreted, leading to an entire semiotic system (Siegel, 1995). Peirce's model (1931–1958) consisted of a sign (*representamen*), an object, and an interpretant. A sign (in the previous paragraph, the word *cow*) was created to represent a given object (the actual animal), and an interpretant was the meaning a person created to make sense of the sign (i.e., "I will call that four-legged animal that eats grass and moos a cow"). Unlike De Saussure's linguistic semiotic model, Peirce's

model accounted for multiple modes in addition to language and called attention to the role of individual interpretation in the meaning-making process.

Building from Peirce's three-part model, Siegel (1995) argued that when an interpretant moves from one sign system to another through a process called *transmediation*, "the borders of meaning are 'opened up' even further" (p. 460). Changing sign systems allows access to new knowledge. The process of shifting sign systems requires the creation of new interpretants to help create new meanings, and this creation helps students better understand the previous sign system they were using, as well as the new sign system they are exploring. Transmediation can lead to students' increased ability to understand what they have learned and express that understanding in meaningful ways to others. The more modes that are accessed, the more learning occurs.

### *Technological Shifts in Literacy Demands*

De Saussure and Peirce's semiotic theories have long been considered the sole purview of linguistic anthropology. As technological advances transform readers' orientation to texts and information access, educators have been paying increased attention to how sign systems have been used to construct meaning. Kress (2003) observed that as readers became more accustomed to processing online texts, they necessarily drew on multiple semiotic modes besides language to understand meaning, including spatial orientation and visual and sound cues. Writing has "inevitably become more image-like" (Kress, 2003, p. 48), and learning how to process meaning through images helps students to function effectively in the world.

A caution is warranted in emphasizing technological literacy. Because technology has been interlinked with economic growth and job marketability, it has been easy for technology instruction to be transformed into yet another literacy commodity to add onto a list of surface skills students must master. Several researchers (Bigum, 2002; Bruce, 2002; King & O'Brien, 2002;

Lewis & Finders, 2002; Luke, 2000; Morgan, 1993) have noted that if educators lose sight of how technology influences textual orientation and instead focus on technology solely as a job skill, then students' impressions of literacy as a body of transmissible content, rather than a process, is further reinforced. Kellner (2002) highlighted the importance of schools teaching students to use technology for future job use but also stressed that technological literacy must move beyond simply knowing technical skills. Students and teachers need to learn together how to master both logistical issues (e.g., navigating Web sites, using e-mail, and designing Web pages) and critique the messages they receive via technology (e.g., analyzing intended audiences for Web sites or critiquing issues of digital access). A space has been created for rethinking literacy instruction in ways that can better enable students to participate in life opportunities beyond school, but that space must be entered wisely.

Luke (2002) observed that educators might mistakenly latch onto multiliteracies theory as a set of methods that can be standardized. Lankshear and Snyder (2000) used the term "old wine in new bottles" (p. 22) to describe this practice of adding a new theoretical construct onto an already existing system without critically examining the system's structure. As attention to nonprint literacies grows in professional literacy organizations such as the National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) and the International Reading Association (IRA; see NCTE's [2003] teacher preparation standards, which include nine substandards directly related to analyzing and producing nonprint media), the temptation to focus on only one or two aspects of multiliteracies theory—typically overt instruction and some critical framing—grows as well. One way to avoid slipping into yet another content knowledge mastery mindset is to remember that technological literacy, like all literacies, was never an end in itself, but rather a means to achieve some larger social purpose (Luke, 2000). Following Freire's (1993) concept of critical literacy, reading and writing (and, by extension, understanding a Web page or other nonprint text) exist in order to accomplish something. They do not exist simply for the sake of providing



students practice in using them. Critical pedagogies, including the multiliteracies-oriented pedagogy explored in this article, are intended to encourage teachers and students to think more broadly about why literacy instruction matters and why certain texts have been emphasized more than others. The goal is to shift literacy instruction so that students thought about literacy as a process rather than a product.

### *Multimodal Classroom Approaches*

Because much of the multiliteracies-themed writing by members of the New London Group has centered on issues of technology, many of the studies involving multiliteracies theory have followed suit. Lewis and Fabos (2005) focused on two teenage girls' use of instant messaging, highlighting the divergence of in-school literacy from the nonlinear, immediately relevant writing they perform outside of school. Chandler-Olcott and Mahar (2003) examined adolescent girls' use of Internet fan sites and the intense engagement girls have with such online texts in comparison with print texts. Other multimodal research centering on technology includes an exploration of how adolescents processed Web sites for entertainment (Stone, 2007), an analysis of adolescents' use of fanfiction for multimodal, audience-based communication (Black, 2007; Thomas, 2007), and the tracing of how adolescents transformed electronic images (such as digital photographs) that were intended for one purpose into new formats for new communicative purposes (Knobel & Lankshear, 2007).

These research studies provided valuable examples of how individual students used nonprint texts and multiple modes of communication. Studies of such multiliteracies-oriented practices in broader classroom settings, however, are much less common. Short, Kauffman, and Kahn (2000) documented how 4th- and 5th-grade students who struggled to make sense of various literary texts were able to subsequently understand them after responding to the texts through art, drama, music, or movement. Gallas (1994) demonstrated how drawing, dance, and music can become ways to teach 1st- and 2nd-grade stu-

dents how to understand school-based literacy conventions. Siegel (1995) provided an example of two high school students using drawing as a connection point between a mathematical concept and a social science concept. Although these studies offered examples of how a multiliteracies orientation can help students better access traditional school-based literacy, they have remained focused on individual struggling students within a traditionally organized language arts curriculum, primarily at the elementary level. A body of literature centered on using multiple modes to create meaning within classrooms has been growing (e.g., Kist, 2005; Richards & McKenna, 2003), but it has tended to stay at a methodological level rather than addressing underlying purposes for using nonprint modes in the classroom. Moje, Young, Readence, and Moore (2000) wrote of the importance of “ecological ways of thinking” (p. 403) about adolescent literacy, emphasizing that a blanket application of a literacy pedagogy that is highly effective in one setting can be ineffective in other settings. Context has been highly significant in determining the effectiveness of a given teaching practice, and studies of multimodal classroom contexts still have been rare.

This article provides an extended, contextualized examination of how multiliteracies theory plays out in one classroom setting, directly addressing the lack of documented instances of multiliteracies-oriented language arts classrooms. In presenting this multiliteracies classroom context and students’ responses to it, the article also addresses the difficulty some students experienced in focusing on the thinking processes involved with multimodal text production. Their responses to course goals and materials highlight the complicated nature of shifting literacy paradigms in new directions.

## Methodology

The classroom setting was an urban 11th- and 12th-grade language arts course entitled *Perspectives of Literature and Composition* (hereafter abbreviated as *Perspectives*). Data

were collected during the 2004–2005 academic year. The course instructor, Mr. Brooks, designed assignments that blurred boundaries between print and nonprint texts so that students focused on how the mode in which they chose to communicate a message influenced that message's final manifestation. As a means of reaching that larger goal, students analyzed multiple text types and produced their own nonprint and print texts. Students enrolled in Perspectives represented a broad range of academic abilities, reflective of the English department's desire for students to learn together in nontracked settings. Most students were college-bound, including several students who opted out of Advanced Placement courses because they preferred the subject matter of Perspectives; however, the course also attracted students who did not include college in their future plans.

The driving research question for this study was: How did students respond to a language arts course that expanded the concept of text to include both nonprint and print modes? This research question was broken into the following subquestions: How did students respond to nonprint course assignments? Did students find such assignments useful for their learning, and why or why not? How capable did students feel in language arts courses as a result of participating in this course? Finally, how did participation in multimodal assignments and the accompanying discussions and analysis influence students' participation in more traditionally print-based literacy activities?

### *Data Sources*

During the 2004–2005 academic year, the researcher observed Mr. Brooks' classroom twice a week for 50 minutes each visit, taking field notes and then writing analytical memos about the field notes after each visit. Seven focal students (4 boys and 3 girls) were followed more closely throughout the year, and each of these students was interviewed three times during the year. Focal students provided samples of their work for further analysis; these samples also served as prompts for the second interview conducted at the beginning of the second semester. Other data sources included

course syllabi and assignment descriptions, documents from district planning meetings, a 2-week planning journal kept by the course instructor, and interviews with the course instructor and other personnel involved with the course. Due to space constraints, this article focuses on student data, although data collected from the course instructor and other key adults were used in tandem with student data to better understand outside influences on students' experiences with the course.

Focal students were chosen through the use of a literacy interest survey adapted from Atwell (1987) and classroom observations. Twenty-seven students took the survey, which was designed to assist researchers in better understanding their beliefs about what activities the students considered to involve literacy. The students rated 59 activities (see Table 1) on a 5-point scale from 1 = *definitely does not involve literacy* to 5 = *definitely involves literacy*.

Survey results were divided into the following categories: surveys recognizing only print-based activities as involving literacy, surveys including nonprint-based activities as involving literacy, and surveys expressing uncertainty about the literate nature of nonprint-based activities (surveys where nonprint activities were frequently labeled "*not sure*" fell into this category). Students who most strongly represented each category were identified and then more closely observed in order to pinpoint potential focal students. Focal students also were chosen in an attempt to represent the gender composition of the course and the wide range of participation and engagement levels within classroom activities.

Member checking of focal students' data took place late in the school year, just prior to the third set of interviews. The second set of interviews, which focused on students' engagement with individual course assignments and took place roughly halfway through the school year, included student articulation of their sense of course goals and how their goals for the course aligned with the instructor's goals. Students reviewed excerpts from the second interview transcripts and then talked about how well they thought those excerpts represented their current feelings about the course. The original plan was for students to review complete transcripts, but students were overwhelmed with the amount of

# Table 1

## Activities

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Checking e-mail	Writing an essay
Looking up sports scores	Reading a play
Reading a history chapter	Reading a movie review
Writing a note to a friend	Building a model
Watching a movie	Writing a letter to the editor
Listening to a radio interview	Signing a yearbook
Listening to a song on the radio	Understanding a credit card application
Doing your math homework	Telling a joke
Completing a science experiment	Looking up programs in the <i>TV Guide</i>
Instant messaging	Reading a poem
Making a grocery list	Reading a picture book with a toddler
Ordering pizza	Following a recipe
Reading a map	Sewing a dress
Reading a bus schedule	Telling a funny story to a friend
Watching television	Downloading music to your iPod
Watching a news program	Writing a story
Reading a novel	Researching a term paper
Hooking up a DVD player	Writing a term paper
Shopping at Wal-Mart	Playing Pictionary
Looking at a billboard ad	Playing Charades
Reading the comics	Scrapbooking
Reading a graphic novel	Reading a magazine
Playing a sport	Listening to the daily announcements
Learning a dance	Giving a speech for class
Filling out a job application	Keeping a journal
Reading want ads	Writing a thank-you note
Using coupons at the store	Buying something on eBay
Shopping for clothes	Buying a car
Balancing a checkbook	Getting a bank loan
Performing in a play	

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material and were better able to process brief segments instead. The transcripts were presented in standard paragraph format rather than broken out into lines, which also facilitated student understanding. Students confirmed or refuted the researcher's understanding of their experiences with the course, enabling the researcher to adjust coding categories to better fit the data.

### *Data Analysis*

Data were analyzed using grounded theory (Strauss & Corbin, 1998) to determine recurring patterns across transcripts and analytical memos. After each class observation, field notes were carefully reviewed and synthesized into analytical memos that highlighted emerging themes. Transcribed interviews also were reviewed and synthesized into analytical memos, again with an attempt to expose emerging themes. At the end of each month of data collection, the researcher analyzed the series of memos, grouping emerging themes into increasingly formal coding categories (Merriam, 1998). Coding categories included student understanding of the course purpose, student beliefs about the need for print literacy, student beliefs about the value of nonprint texts, and student engagement with assignments.

As coding categories emerged, the researcher returned to student transcripts and artifacts, piecing students' individual responses to particular assignments into an increasingly complicated picture of how students were responding to the instructor's larger course goals. This recursive reading revealed a pattern of students aligning with or rejecting their instructor's curricular vision. As this pattern became increasingly apparent, students were grouped according to their relative alignment with instructor goals. Three major categories emerged: students who did not understand the instructor's vision and saw the course as irrelevant to their future literacy needs; students who understood and adopted the instructor's vision; and students who liked what they understood of the instructor's vision but needed more guidance in completing assignments and thinking critically.

In grouping students, however, no student fit neatly into any one category, and the contradictions that arose within data (e.g., a student valuing nonprint-based texts and then refusing to engage in assignments involving nonprint-based texts) yielded the most interesting findings. The contradictions that emerged during coding further highlight the complexities involved in implementing a multiliteracies orientation to language arts instruction.

## **Institutional Context and Introduction to the Students**

### *The School Site*

Polk High School, with an enrollment of 1,800 students, serves students in grades 9–12 in a Midwestern city with a population of about 121,000 people. The school's student population was approximately 91% White, with the remaining 9% being African American, Asian, and Hispanic. Polk High is located in the northeast part of the city in a high socioeconomic status (SES) area. Most residents hold jobs in engineering, medicine, or education. Although school boundaries include some governmental housing areas and a rural community about 15 miles to the northwest, real estate values within Polk High boundaries have been generally quite high as compared to the rest of the city (personal interview, school counselor, April 19, 2005). One side of the school bordered a quiet middle-class suburb with well-established trees, older single-family ranch homes, an elementary school, and several small churches. Behind the athletic fields lay sprawling, two- and three-story mansions with extensive landscaping, and four- and five-car garages. There were very few apartment buildings within Polk boundaries, and those homes, which were older, had carefully maintained yards and new paint and roofs (field notes, September 2, 2004).

All 9th and 10th graders across the district enrolled in Language Arts 9 and 10, which had a standardized curriculum. Juniors and seniors chose from a menu of courses to complete

their language arts credits: AP Language, AP Literature, U.S. Humanities, World Humanities, or Perspectives. Journalism, Theatre, Speech and Debate, and Creative Writing were available as language arts electives, but students could only enroll in one of these electives if they were simultaneously enrolled in another language arts course (personal interview, department chair, December 7, 2004).

### *Revising the Tracking Mentality*

Up until 1998, language arts courses across the district were heavily (albeit tacitly) tracked based on students' academic performance. Language arts teachers, particularly at Polk, were concerned that this practice limited student learning opportunities. This concern about leveling motivated teachers at Polk to spearhead the development of a district task force to reexamine and redesign the district's language arts curriculum in light of current research and student academic needs (personal interview, department chair, December 7, 2004).

Task force members studied NCTE and IRA literacy position statements in order to determine the standards to which each language arts course would be held accountable. Several task force members insisted that print literacy was not the only literacy in which students needed to develop proficiency. Thus, Perspectives was created so that students could better develop their critical literacy skills by analyzing both nonprint and print texts. The course included a strong production component ensuring that students could learn about how various types of texts functioned by creating them. Because of this productive element, Perspectives followed a writing workshop model, with students and teachers determining together the texts to be explored and the order and pacing of assignments. In 2004, after the arrival of a new district language arts facilitator, course texts were standardized across the district, although individual instructors still had some freedom in the development of course assignments (personal interview, course instructor, January 25, 2005).



### *The Perspectives Curriculum*

Because Perspectives had been taught at four different high schools by two or three different teachers in each building, the curriculum as designed by the 1998 task force was fluid, allowing for teachers to adjust their text choices and assignments to the needs of their specific student population. The single unifying focus was that the course was about “reading, writing, thinking, and analyzing primarily Post World War II texts, media, and culture” (course syllabus, August 23, 2004). With the change in district language arts facilitators described above, there was a push toward standardizing the curriculum. The teachers in the various schools resisted this push, and the curriculum described below represents a compromise between the district language arts facilitator and individual teachers. The district curriculum template was designed to preserve consistency across school sites while also allowing space for individual teachers to shape their instruction according to their pedagogical strengths.

The district framework for Perspectives centered on 10 key questions students should be able to answer by the end of the course:

1. How do we produce texts for varied audiences and purposes?
2. How do texts create or shape perceptions of self and culture?
3. How does the use of reading strategies help us understand a variety of texts?
4. How does the method we use to analyze a text influence what we learn?
5. What are the important elements of critical perspectives such as race, class, and gender and how do we apply them?
6. How does process writing produce a more effective form of communication, and how can it be applied to a variety of texts?

7. How do we decide what information is relevant to understanding or explaining an issue and how do we use that information to create an original text?
8. How does our use of convention influence the way in which we are understood or perceived?
9. How are speaking and listening skills applied in traditional and non-traditional formats?
10. What is unique about Post World War II American literature, media, technology, and culture? (course syllabus, August 23, 2004)

Terms were organized by topic, with district-wide core texts. During fall term, students focused on memoirs (reading, viewing, and writing them), as well as tools of textual analysis. Core texts were *A River Runs Through It* (Eberts & Redford, 1992), *This Boy's Life: A Memoir* (Wolff, 1989), and *The House on Mango Street* (Cisneros, 1991). During winter term, students focused on media literacy and issues of race, class, and gender. They also learned how to adapt texts from one medium to another. Core texts were *The Color Purple* (Walker, 1982), the play *Wit* (Edson, 1999), and the films *Tough Guise: Violence, Media & the Crisis in Masculinity* (Ericsson, Talreja, & Jhally, 1999) and *Killing Us Softly 3* (Jhally, 1999). Spring term had the broadest focus, with students exploring issues in modern culture and completing some type of research project. In Mr. Brooks' classroom, this meant exploring postmodern literature and culture and creating a research paper arguing for the inclusion of a particular work into a "popular culture canon." Core texts were *Slaughterhouse-Five* (Vonnegut, 1969) and the film *The Atomic Café* (Loader & Rafferty, 1982; district course overview, April 5, 2005).

Mr. Brooks followed the district's core framework but then adjusted individual assignments to better align with his interests in film, graphic novels, and music, as well as his students' learning needs. Within this still fairly print-oriented district template, Mr. Brooks organized text discussion and analysis around a framework called the Big 4: audience, composition, purpose, and

context (Atwan, 2002). He saw this framework as “more visually friendly than other kinds of note-taking” (personal interview, September 16, 2004) and worked throughout the year to help his students see that if something could be examined according to the Big 4, then it could be defined as a text.

Within the Big 4 framework, Mr. Brooks designed major assignments that were multimodal in nature. These assignments included a comic book memoir, the adaptation of a short story to film for a cable company, and analysis of photographs, music, and other nonlinguistic texts. This multimodality supported his belief that students needed to shift texts they had produced into nonprint modes in order to generate new critical insights (personal interview, Mr. Brooks, September 20, 2004). Multimodal assignments were intended to work alongside more traditional print-oriented assignments (e.g., essay exams or literary analyses) to help students succeed in all aspects of the language arts curriculum.

### *Introducing the Focal Students*

Establishing the three major categories for student responses to multimodal assignments within Mr. Brooks’ classroom was fairly straightforward once coding categories began to emerge. Grouping students within those categories was much more complicated. No student responded positively to every multimodal assignment nor did any student reject every multimodal assignment. Numerous factors influenced students’ experiences, including their already existing skill in producing nonprint texts, their engagement with writing, their willingness to perform school-based literacy tasks, and their engagement with reading. Due to space constraints, this article focused on students who represented opposite ends of a nonprint continuum: Cassandra and Bud, who did not view multimodal assignments as real language arts work, and Kevin and Benny, who viewed multimodal assignments as a means of expanding their literacy options.

Although Cassandra, a senior, preferred the role of cheerleader to that of focused student, she saw herself as college-bound

and was careful to hand in high-quality work on time. Cassandra generally slept or text messaged during in-class reading time, but she enthusiastically participated in whole-class discussions and was sensitive to audience considerations in her writing and speaking. Bud, a junior, liked discussions but rarely came to class with completed assignments or even a pen and notebook. He wanted to be the center of attention and used a funny, stupid guy persona to hide a dislike of reading and writing.

Kevin, a senior, liked to write but preferred drawing. He frequently came to class early to talk with Mr. Brooks about musical groups or to share whatever art piece he was currently creating. Kevin often needed reminders for major deadlines and a few extensions, but he would generally complete course readings. Benny, also a senior, positioned himself as an intellectual rebel, breaking away from the expectation that he would take AP Literature and Composition and enrolling in Perspectives instead. Benny read widely for pleasure and was active in the Polk High chapter of Young Democrats.

All four of these students enrolled in Perspectives because they wanted something different from their language arts experience, but those students who performed better and seemed more content with the course were better able to verbalize what they wanted a language arts course to do for them. These students' experiences have been presented below as four interrelated, yet separate lenses through which to consider the application of multiliteracies theory. They remind educators that pushing curriculum in new directions creates a certain amount of resistance that can only be resolved through consideration of student as well as teacher and administrative voices. Teachers may implement curricular ideas that appear on the surface to benefit students, but if students do not see those ideas as meaningful for their own learning purposes, then the desired learning outcomes cannot take place. Students' experiences were each labeled to represent their principal judgment of the role multimodal assignments should play in language arts.

## Analysis of Student Responses

### *Cassandra—Questioning the Relevancy of Multimodal Assignments to College*

Even though Cassandra was critical of the course by the end of the year, she began the year with a high degree of enthusiasm for multimodal assignments. She completed the first assignment of the course, a visual map of memories to be used as a resource for the rest of the memoir unit, the day after it was assigned. Her map was colorful, with each life event creatively titled and represented by some sort of visual icon. She received a very high grade on the assignment and looked forward to further art-oriented activities (personal interview, September 28, 2004). As the year progressed and she began to see the projects Mr. Brooks assigned as more conventional and academically focused, her level of dissatisfaction rose.

An event after the researcher's second interview with Cassandra illustrated this sense of contradiction. Cassandra had spent the majority of the interview complaining about various aspects of the course: "I don't see this helping me . . . in college. I know in college it's not [going to] help me. I had Perspectives, ooh. . . . All the other classes that are being taught by other teachers are doing more extensive things. . . . Ours is just kind of here you go, go sit. . . . So it's like you can't really learn that much" (personal interview, March 16, 2005). The interview ended and the researcher moved across the room to look at students' short story adaptations. Cassandra returned to her desk to work on her popular culture canon paper, an assignment requiring students to argue for the inclusion of some aspect of popular culture into the language arts curriculum.

Minutes later, she called across the room and asked if the researcher wanted to see the draft of her popular culture canon paper. She was excited about her chosen topic, Mary-Kate and Ashley Olsen, and explained her entire argument, pulling out articles and photographs to support her reasoning. The conversation ended, and the researcher went back across the room.

Cassandra then crossed the room to where the researcher was sitting and shared a few more points to support her paper. Cassandra's high level of enthusiasm was striking, especially given that less than 20 minutes previous she had said the course had nothing thought-provoking or relevant to offer her (field notes, March 16, 2005).

Cassandra's dramatic shift from a slight disappointment with the class early in the semester to a complete rejection later on seemed to center on her understanding of reading's role in the course. Because she saw Perspectives as a project-based course, she did not want any reading; at the same time, in order for her to view the course as a real language arts course, it had to involve extensive reading. It was not an issue of Cassandra not being proficient in reading; in fact, she used Language Arts 10, which had required extensive reading, as the standard against which she measured this course's rigor (personal interview, September 28, 2004). Cassandra's resistance to the reading load stemmed from two points: (a) She had signed up for Perspectives under the impression that a course involving projects would not involve much reading, and (b) she did not like the subject matter of the chosen texts nor the fact that many lacked a linear narrative structure.

Cassandra equated literacy with reading and reading with effort. She liked what she termed art projects because they did not require the same amount of conscious effort for her that reading did. Activities such as analyzing a photo did not seem like literacy work to Cassandra because such visual and mental analysis was easy for her:

C: Making sense of that photo is not reading a book . . .

R: So was looking at the photo literacy?

C: Could have been, but I don't really think it was. I mean, *I* don't think it was. We were just looking. (personal interview, September 28, 2004)

Similarly, Cassandra did not see activities involving technology, such as text messaging and e-mailing, as involving literacy

because they were activities she performed regularly and easily. Although Cassandra enjoyed nonprint projects and wanted to do more of them because they were easy for her to complete, she did not see them as literacy-related, which meant that completing multimodal assignments did not fulfill her expectations for what should happen in a language arts course. She disliked reading and wanted to avoid it as much as possible, but she also felt that a course that did not require a large amount of reading lacked academic rigor (personal interview, March 16, 2005).

At the point when Cassandra was most resistant to reading assigned texts, Mr. Brooks introduced the short story adaptation assignment, which was exactly the type of project Cassandra enjoyed. Cassandra completed her storyboard very carefully; however, she disliked the assignment because her sense of a storyboard did not match assignment parameters. She did not see a good reason for planning out individual shots, complete with camera angles and lighting and sound cues, because that kind of effort hearkened back to the kind of effort required in the reading she was hoping to avoid: “We had to write so much about it, like, I don’t know how the camera angle’s [going to] go. I don’t know, maybe . . . you’re [going to] change it when you do it . . . . So . . . I liked it, but I didn’t like it” (personal interview, April 28, 2005). Cassandra wanted to draw whatever was in her head, while Mr. Brooks asked her to plan consciously what she was drawing and explain in writing why she was making those choices.

Cassandra’s resistance to the short story adaptation reflected the fact that she did not connect with the instructor’s purpose for the assignment: to help students critically consider how shifting modes would shift how an author communicated her message to an audience. Likewise, during the second term final exam, when students participated in a culminating discussion about the larger issue of adaptation based on its treatment in the film *Adaptation* (Demme & Jonze, 2002), Cassandra participated for the sake of receiving a grade but did not make the connection between the film and the larger themes for the course. She focused on what movies she would have preferred to watch instead of *Adaptation* (e.g., *Schindler’s List* [Glovin & Spielberg, 1993]) rather than

on how film shifts the conveyance of an author's message (field notes, March 1, 2005).

Cassandra's barrier to accepting multimodal assignments within a language arts course did not stem from any difficulty in completing them or even from a preference for print-oriented assignments. For Cassandra, the resistance reflected a disconnect with larger language arts instructional purposes. She liked the thinking and creativity involved in multimodal assignments but distrusted them as belonging in language arts because they were not the painful learning experiences she associated with literacy. Cassandra might have been able to shift this attitude had the larger purposes for multimodal thinking and text production been clarified for her.

### *Bud—Seeing Print and Nonprint Literacy Activities as Unrelated*

Like Cassandra, Bud enjoyed nonprint literacy activities. Unlike Cassandra, he was not proficient in traditional school literacy tasks. Bud disliked reading and writing, and this distaste for traditional print-based literacy activities in combination with his high engagement with nonprint semiotic modes made him, in many ways, exactly the kind of student for whom *Perspectives* was designed. However, Bud struggled in *Perspectives* for the same reasons he struggled in more traditional language arts courses: he would not read, and he did not complete assignments (with the exception of the comic book memoir and his section of the short story adaptation). Assignments that were intended to serve as bridges from Bud's nonprint proficiency to the print proficiency he needed in other school tasks did not work in the way the instructor intended.

However, Bud was willing to struggle with the thinking involved in nonprint assignments, at least in terms of their design. For example, Bud could analyze his comic book memoir panel by panel, pointing out the various inside jokes referenced by subtle visual cues (personal interview, March 14, 2005). He also experimented with composition elements, designing one



panel as a high overhead shot looking down into the hotel room as he and his buddies planned their evening.

Bud's willingness to think carefully about nonprint text production also was evident in the soundtrack he created for his group's short story adaptation. In this case, Bud was willing to write because he could do so in an unconventional format: liner notes for a CD. Bud carefully measured each of his song explanations so they would fit within an actual CD cover, and he described the lengthy process of burning the CD (personal interview, March 14, 2005). This assignment allowed Bud to draw on his love of music in a way that overcame his reticence to write.

Early in the school year, when asked how he interpreted course goals, Bud's response demonstrated a fairly strong understanding of the course's themes:

R: What do you think . . . the teacher's trying to do with the class?

B: Trying to make a topic or in a book or whatever and then . . . look at every angle of it, like from a movie producer's view or . . . an author's view or . . . us as students' view. It seems like that's what we're mostly doing in class. (personal interview, September 30, 2004)

Bud made this statement during a time period when Mr. Brooks had been emphasizing the Big 4 framework and its applicability to a number of texts in multiple modes. Bud had avoided writing any of his memoirs, but he could see where other analysis activities at which he was more proficient fit into the course.

Later in the year, when the popular culture canon paper was assigned, Bud could no longer see this focus. Bud was frustrated with being assigned a research project hidden beneath a popular culture veneer. He liked the idea of being able to write about a topic he liked (the band Guns N' Roses), but he was confused about assignment expectations. After the considerable freedom of the comic and short story adaptation assignments, he wanted complete freedom in this assignment as well. At the same time, he

did not understand how to structure the assignment and wanted a model he could follow as a scaffold for his own thinking:

[Mr. Brooks'] assignments are . . . so open-ended. I can do something good if somebody [says], "Do this and do it this way" or if it's *really* open and you can just do whatever you want. . . . I can handle that, but this [paper] he . . . gives you these little guidelines and he grades due to those guidelines, but he doesn't tell you . . . what they should exactly be. (personal interview, March 14, 2005)

Although Mr. Brooks designed this assignment to link students' popular culture knowledge with a more school-based writing task, Bud saw this paper as just one more assignment that required him to perform in a mode he disliked, regardless of how interested he was in his topic.

Bud's distrust of the popular culture canon assignment came in part from the fact that he focused his cognitive energy on creativity rather than on how shifting modes influenced the author's message. He enjoyed completing the comic book memoir and the short story adaptation, but he did not see them as connected with one another or with the rest of the curriculum: "I had . . . so much fun thinking up how I could make this [the comic] be cool and how . . . I could make it funny . . . but that [the popular culture canon paper] . . . can you really express *anything* in it? Not really" (personal interview, March 14, 2005). The bridge function of the course did not work for Bud, in large part because he had lost track of what the course was trying to accomplish overall.

As with Cassandra, Bud needed an explanation of why the type of multimodal thinking he was being asked to do mattered in a language arts class. He needed to see the larger picture. Bud's enthusiasm for nonprint communication modes did not connect with print communication modes because he did not see himself as ever needing to perform print-based literacy activities outside of school. He needed reasons to cross the bridge that multimodal assignments were intended to build.

*Kevin—Using Multimodal Activities  
as a Vehicle for Critical Thinking*

In contrast to Cassandra and Bud, Kevin embraced multimodal activities as a way to expand his means of communicating important ideas to others. Like Cassandra, Kevin preferred drawing and projects to traditional reading and writing, but he was willing to read and write provided he had a high degree of creative license. Kevin was similar to Bud in terms of his struggles to complete assignments on time; however, Kevin saw value in print-oriented reading and writing and therefore did not avoid such activities completely. His struggles were due to organizational issues rather than a lack of interest or skill. Most importantly, Kevin could see clear reasons for taking the risks involved with shifting his thinking about texts.

Kevin was most engaged in the comic book memoir. He described it as “the best assignment I’ve ever gotten . . . in my entire life” (personal interview, February 24, 2005) because it led him to seriously consider comic book production as a career option. Kevin chose a story that he literally could not have represented in a strictly print-based format because the storyline depended on interweaving words and visual representation of letters on the page. He explained, “I don’t think I could have described [the subject of his comic] well enough for you to actually see what everything looked like” (personal interview, February 24, 2005). Kevin drew himself as the narrator of his comic, but he also represented himself through the storyline, which focused on how he draws various letters of the alphabet. Even the title of the comic, “Don’t Read This,” reminded readers that his comic depended on visual orientation rather than words alone. Although the plot literally centered on letters, the visual representation mattered more than the meaning of the letters when used to form words.

Because of his experience with the comic book memoir, Kevin viewed the more print-based activities in class as part of a larger whole. Later in the year, when the course moved in a more print-based direction, Kevin still saw the course as pushing his thinking in new directions because it included a num-

ber of assignments that differed from his previous language arts experiences:

I've learned a lot more in this class than I've learned in any other English class. . . . Like what a screenplay looks like, how you go about doing that and . . . I wouldn't have learned about comics in other English classes, like, nobody asks for that. . . . So . . . I think it's doing pretty good in teaching me things that I didn't know about. (personal interview, February 24, 2005)

Kevin used the comic assignment as a baseline for the type of thinking he saw the course as teaching overall, even when, for a considerable amount of time, the course strayed from this ideal.

During this more traditional section of the course, Kevin revisited his earlier definition of a text. In response to the question of how the course had influenced his definition of texts, Kevin said, "I thought text was like essays . . . just like an essay is text or read an article but . . . now [I] see everything as . . . text, pretty much" (personal interview, February 24, 2005). This response, given well after the first term final exam where Mr. Brooks had last mentioned the Big 4 framework, exemplified Mr. Brooks' hope that his students would eventually view everything as a text.

Despite Kevin's sense that almost anything could be seen as a text, he had one very clear criterion for what could *not* be a text: any communication that did not allow for maximum reader interpretation. Following this line of reasoning, Kevin did not consider film to be a text:

You're pretty much . . . forced to read it at this certain pace and . . . forced to spend more time on . . . one scene than another. . . . Every other text you can . . . focus on . . . one paragraph more than the other but with a film I don't think you have that much of a choice. (personal interview, February 24, 2005)

As Kevin began to design the storyboard for his group's short story adaptation, however, his sense that film limited reader interpretation and therefore could not be considered a text began to shift. The production process helped him experience the range of choices involved in composing shots, and designing the storyboard helped him realize that a good deal of interpretive freedom was still involved: "We've been working on this for a while, and now that I think about it, . . . I'm seeing [films] more as a text, actually. Seeing everything that goes into [film production], it's pretty much the same thing that goes . . . into . . . a novel" (personal interview, April 26, 2005). Kevin was willing to revise his definition of a text throughout the year based on how he experienced various assignments.

Kevin experienced multimodal assignments very differently from Cassandra and Bud because of his sense of the larger goals for the course. Rather than seeing the course from a print-based lens, Kevin saw print as providing a framework that he could then build on creatively through nonprint assignments. Just as his comic book memoir literally blended print letters and nonprint visuals, Kevin's understanding of the course blurred the boundary between print and nonprint modes. Kevin was comfortable with the liminal space opened by Mr. Brooks' multimodal orientation because he could see how it freed his expressive abilities.

### *Benny—Starting From Print Strength, Moving to Multimodality*

Benny, like Kevin, valued the expressive freedom offered through multimodal assignments. Benny, however, preferred writing to other communicative modes. He welcomed the challenge to his thinking that multimodal assignments fostered, seeing it as valuable for college, but he also experienced some cognitive dissonance along the way because of his insistence that print should remain as the core of the language arts curriculum.

As Benny described his experiences with the course, an interesting tension emerged between his desire to move into nonlinguistic modes and his understanding that language arts courses

focused on print-based reading and writing. On one hand, he was able to articulate Mr. Brooks' belief that a text could be interpreted very broadly: "Literature and language isn't just reading and writing, it's a lot of media, it's a lot of images and things that just necessarily aren't writing" (personal interview, October 19, 2004).

Yet immediately after making this statement, Benny described his ideal language arts class as focusing on "actually teaching fundamentals of English" and knowing the "structure, the comprehension, and all . . . that goes into writing a good piece of English" (personal interview, October 19, 2004). He described assignments he liked the most across his language arts courses, again returning to a print emphasis: "I think English class is just to make people . . . more aware of what is good writing, how to write, and what contributes to both of those . . . [and] learning how to know if something is good" (personal interview, October 19, 2004). Benny described his home-based literacy practices, particularly his use of instant messaging, as a literacy that "kind of deteriorates . . . whereas at school it's more professional . . . and there's more of a need to do better work" (personal interview, October 19, 2004). Benny liked the variety incorporated into Perspectives through more multimodal assignments, but print-based skills remained the core for him.

Benny used his writing proficiency as a safety net as he branched out into other semiotic modes. He struggled to complete the comic book memoir, admitting that "if it would have been an assignment [to] write down something, I could have easily written a story or an essay about it, but to put it into words and drawings with one big space . . . was really difficult for me" (personal interview, February 22, 2005). Struggling with the visual aspects of the comic book memoir, as well as experimenting with incorporating more visual and aural elements within his written work (e.g., his screenplay), presented critical thinking opportunities that Benny enjoyed, helping coalesce for him how all the elements of the course fit together. As Benny explained, "it's [using nonlinguistic texts] doing the same thing, it's conveying the same message, just a totally different . . . medium. . . .

I think that's what this class is all about" (personal interview, February 22, 2005). The blend of print and nonprint assignments helped Benny think more critically about the messages various texts presented and how they conveyed those messages. Such critical thinking, particularly when it involved text production in nonlinguistic modes, was challenging for Benny, but he welcomed the challenge because he saw its larger purpose for his learning.

In some ways, Benny was an anomaly within Perspectives because he came to the course with a combination of strong print-based literacy skills, an understanding of how to play the school success game, and strong critical thinking skills that would have enabled him to succeed in any language arts course he took. Benny was seeking opportunities to expand his thinking, and the opportunity provided in Perspectives to analyze and create texts in multiple semiotic modes gave Benny the space and safety net he needed to do so. Although he was most comfortable in print-based modes because he was most experienced in using them, that comfort enabled him to move into the discomfort of nonprint-based modes with a sense of academic confidence. Such modes were vehicles for new thinking rather than ways to sidestep traditional reading and writing tasks. At the same time, he measured his success in creating nonprint texts by his print-based abilities. Benny's and his fellow students' responses to multimodal assignments demonstrate a complex network of factors that must be considered when shifting the language arts curriculum in a nonprint direction. These factors raise important implications for teachers who want to embed multimodality into their curricula.

## Discussion and Implications

The most provocative finding across this research data is the large number of contradictions inherent in each student's experiences with multimodal language arts assignments. Print proficiency does not necessarily or consistently lead to inter-

est in or valuing of multimodal assignments. Interest in multimodal assignments does not necessarily increase engagement in print-based literacy tasks. Academic skill does not always lead to accepting a shift toward including multimodal texts as important to language arts learning. Such outcomes, which are inherent in Mr. Brooks' vision for the course, happen for some students and some assignments, but not in the straightforward way intended in the curriculum design. Students both adopt and resist Mr. Brooks' assignment purposes depending on their sense of what a language arts curriculum should include, their understanding of Mr. Brooks' larger goals for the assignments, and their self-positioning as skilled or unskilled with print literacy tasks.

These contradictions within student experiences highlight a need for teachers and administrators to carefully consider both the conditions under which multimodal assignments are given and the underlying reasons for bringing multimodal thinking into the classroom. Multimodality can free students' thinking, but only if students understand that multimodal activities are part of an overall orientation toward thinking and communication. If students see them as a temporary change of pace before returning to print-based thinking, then such activities can easily be devalued—as is the case for Cassandra—or seen as a way to avoid traditional reading and writing as well as thinking—as is the case for Bud. Larger curricular goals need to be made clear for students so that they have an opportunity to move beyond a mindset of assignment completion and think about how multimodal thinking fits into broader communication purposes. Cassandra, for example, may not have rejected the popular culture canon paper as “not English” had she and her classmates discussed with Mr. Brooks how the thinking encouraged within that assignment fit with the goals outlined in the syllabus.

An even greater obstacle to incorporating multiliteracies thinking within language arts classrooms, particularly highlighted by Cassandra's and Benny's experiences, is the tacit hierarchy that places print as the most important mode within language arts instruction. All four students fit their understanding of multimodal assignments within a print-based framework.



Bud uses multimodal assignments as a way to receive a modicum of course credit despite his unease with print-based activities, while Cassandra rejects nonprint activities as “not English” because they do not fit her preconception of an appropriate language arts curriculum. Even Benny, who welcomes multimodal assignments as a way to expand his thinking, maintains print as the focal point for gauging his success within the course. Kevin comes closest to rethinking the print hierarchy through his multimodal work, although an exclusively print-based orientation still colors how he spoke about the multimodal texts he creates. Looking across these four cases illustrates a need to not only articulate course goals for students but also to articulate the place of all texts, print and nonprint, in students’ lives.

A print hierarchy is difficult to reseat given how tightly it is interwoven with understandings of language arts as a discipline. Such a reseating requires a large-scale rethinking of the purposes for language arts education, shifting focus from analyzing and producing genres to critiquing current print-based modes and expanding communication into new arenas. Multiliteracies thinking encourages students to think about what they are specifically communicating and how they might best do so for a given audience at a given time. As Gee (2000) articulated the issue:

Children should, indeed, master the standard “genres” of many school-based, specialist, academic, and public-sphere forms of language and social practices, but they should also know how to transform them, break them, and innovate new ones for their own social, cultural, and political purposes. (p. 68)

Following Gee’s reasoning, language arts teachers need to not only help students gain access to various types of academic discourse through, for example, literary analysis, but also address why students would need such discourses and how they might push those discourses in new directions. Rather than performing literacy tasks because of teacher requirements, students need

to learn to alter literacy tasks to communicate their desired meanings.

With the results of this research study in mind, teachers who plan to implement a multiliteracies-oriented course need to keep the following points in mind as they transform multiliteracies theory into practice:

- Multimodal thinking needs to be woven into the overall design of the course. Students need to understand that print and nonprint texts are part of a spectrum of communication.
- Teachers need to provide students with multiple opportunities to talk about how nonprint texts fit into larger communication goals in addition to analyzing specific texts. Because of a traditional print-exclusive focus, students have to learn that nonprint texts also communicate important meanings and matter in their lives. The more opportunities for such conversations in classrooms, the better.
- Teachers need to reexamine their assessment practices, particularly for multimodal assignments, to be sure that they do not unintentionally reinforce print as most important. Essay examinations, for example, should not be the only determination of grades.
- Teachers need to talk together about how multimodal thinking can work across courses to enhance student learning and prepare them for the types of critical thinking and meaning-making they will perform across their lifetimes.

Teachers and other key administrative figures need to see multimodal assignments as not so much a change of method, but as a change of thinking about literacy instruction. The students in this study struggled to envision literacy beyond print terms because they are not accustomed to having such metacognitive conversations. They literally did not have a language with which to discuss such literacy thinking—although some were moving in that direction. Courses such as Perspectives can

create a space in which teachers and students work together to develop the type of broad literacy thinking and critical analysis that will be required outside the school setting. Such thinking, however, depends on teachers shifting their own literacy thinking to include multiple modes and then articulating the purposes for that shift to their students, so that the larger connections become clear for everyone involved.

### *Limitations of the Study*

Because this research was conducted in one classroom, the sample size of students was small. Events observed and assignments completed were highly dependent on one specific context, and iterations of this curriculum would necessarily change within a different school setting and with a different student population. This research was not intended to represent all multiliteracies-oriented curricula but rather to focus more closely on how such a theoretical orientation might appear in one course during one academic year.

The New London Group's (2000) concept of multiliteracies is purposely general, creating another study limitation. Multiliteracies is intended to be a way of thinking about pedagogy rather than a specific method, and so implementing such thinking will necessarily look different depending on the teacher performing the implementation. Although this generality allows maximum teacher adaptability to student needs, it also makes study of multiliteracies-oriented classrooms difficult. Teaching conditions will not be constant across multiple sections of the same course. This article has examined one small portion of a wide pedagogical landscape. As additional manifestations of such pedagogy are examined, researchers and teachers will better understand how such an approach can benefit students long-term.

### *Future Research Needs*

The most pressing research need is for additional longitudinal studies within multiliteracies-oriented classrooms. Given the

current high-stakes testing climate within schools, any efforts to reconceptualize language arts instruction necessarily require evidence demonstrating that through this mode of instruction students achieve deep, lasting literacy. Careful study and documentation of students' experiences within multiliteracies-oriented classrooms can provide such evidence. As more researchers study more individual classrooms, the larger potential of multiliteracies thinking will hopefully become clearer to not only teachers who might choose to implement such thinking but also to administrators and policy makers.

Research also needs to be conducted about how a more multimodal focus influences how language arts is defined as a discipline. What is the role of more traditional print-based texts in a curriculum that values visually and aurally oriented texts as well? How might such a shift in orientation influence teachers' choices of instructional materials? How is student learning affected when teachers introduce such conversations into their classrooms?

Ultimately, researchers need to examine how an expanded concept of language arts instruction influences students' abilities to use literacy effectively across their lives. Such research will need to involve multiple schools and classrooms and extend across multiple years of time. Ideally, this agenda will bring teams of researchers together from different parts of the country. This research agenda is ambitious and multifaceted, creating a broadened literacy portrait to add to the larger conversation about how language arts instruction should be performed. The research territory is broad, but conducting such research will enable teachers and other sponsors of literacy instruction, both within schools and without, to better understand how to balance a network of influences so they can help students learn to adapt to the increasingly complex world in which they live.

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